

A Party for What?

Book Review: Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party (OUP, 1995). Reviewed by James Lund.

It took Crewe and King somewhat longer to write this engaging yet systematic, lucid and thorough account of the SDP than the seven years of the party's existence.

Over nearly five hundred pages, they tell the story of what they represent as the birth, maturity and death of the SDP, interspersing this seeming biography of a political party with an analysis of what they call its 'anatomy', and concluding with an obituary and an epilogue. The book finally ends with the statement that 'the Liberal Democrats in the 1990s— apart from their very real successes in local government — seem not to have progressed very far beyond where the Liberals were a generation before'.

In fact, the organic metaphor of a life, convenient as it no doubt was the purpose of subtling the story they had to tell, is fundamentally misleading. The history of a political party is the history of course of action in the mode of transaction or practice: something that is begun and will end when the initial protagonists or their successors have, for some reason, had enough, or are not longer allowed to continue. In consequence of this fundamental misrepresentation of political action, Crewe and King fail to give anything like sufficient emphasis to a point they make clearly enough in the chapter that concludes the first section of the book, entitled 'What kind of party and whose?'

Following a discussion of the various considerations which 'led twenty-eight Labour MPs to break with their party in 1981-2', Crewe and King pose the crucial question: 'Having decided to leave the party, why did the defectors decide at the same time to set up a new party?' What they call the 'short answer' is that 'the two decisions were the same decision, Most of the defectors were members of Parliament: short of simply resigning their seats, they had no choice but to go somewhere'. 'Simply resigning their seats' is an option which Crewe and King consider in terms of its possibilities for some of the individual involved, but not at all in respect of the fundamental fact that as elected Labour MPs, their duty to their constituents was to resign. They were not, after all, mere jobholders, as most of us are, and almost all of us are now deemed to be.

The fact of the failure to resign, which would have been the proper and honourable course, is related to the fact that the SDP was a beginning in British political life. As such, it was singularly ill thought-out, a misconceived course of action from the outset. Crewe and King, whom little escapes, again record but, under-emphasise, the importance of the fact: 'the SDP, as its very heart, was a

muddle — and by and large was allowed to remain so.' This conclusion is related to the question they posed earlier: 'What did Jenkins and the Gang of Three think they were doing when set up the SDP?' Between the question and the conclusion falls the observation: 'It is hardly too strong to say that they did not know what they were doing.' Subsequently, Crewe and King remark, in relation to another, not very helpful, metaphor for the beginning of a political party, namely the design of an experimental plane: 'One does not stop to argue about whether, if the plane flies, one is going to fly it to Washington or New York: one gets on with the job. Jenkins and the Gang of Three simply got on the job.' It seems that Professors of Government, as Crewe and King both are, are not called upon to study what differentiates what it is to act politically from what it is to design and make useful things, or from what it is to be a job-holder: a contributor to an ill-defined 'social process', generally deemed to be economic, and ultimately identified with the maintenance of the life process, which is the proper province of labouring.

Those important strictures apart, concerning the all-important question of what it is to act politically, the book continues with a discussion of the different purposes of the individuals who composed the Gang of Four. Ultimately the story it tells shows how the pressures created by both the electoral system and the course of events from 1981 onwards forced the protagonists apart and their different purposes to be abandoned.

Of particular interest to present-day Liberal Democrats is all that concerns the creation, fortunes and breakup of the alliance. In this connection there is, I think, one point of great and urgent interest. In the course of writing the obituary of the SDP, subtitled 'A Study in Failure', Crewe and King note that, despite an initial aspiration on the part of some that the party should become the Labour Party Mark II, neither the SDP, nor the Liberals were, in Sir Ian Gilmour's phrase, 'interest-based'. This is to say 'they did not appeal to any specific social class, or religious denomination or ethnic group, or region, or small nation'. The implication of this observation is that both parties ultimately sought to appeal to individual electors on political grounds, but this is not an inference made by Crewe and King. Such remains the case with the Liberal Democrats today, who, however, continue to shirk the question of their political identity on a national level. That this is so is not unconnected with Crewe and King's concluding observation.